

10 Career adventures from learning languages

Paul Kaye¹

1. Personal journey in languages

Learning and using languages has been a central feature of most of my working life. In my current job, I help to promote multilingualism, language learning and the language industry in the UK, as well as to raise awareness of careers in the EU civil service for those with language knowledge. I am on temporary secondment from the European Commission's translation service, where I worked as a translator for five years. I am steeped in language talk every day, but even in earlier phases of my career, where languages were not the primary focus, knowing them has always given me an advantage and has been essential in making the next career move.

I had a monolingual British upbringing and my language journey started with just a single one: French was the only modern language that my local comprehensive offered, and it became my best and favourite subject at school. It seemed to come very naturally: I had always liked mimicking voices and accents, and speaking French just involved putting on a French accent and using French words instead of English ones. I was helped hugely by three exchange visits to France during my school years. But for a reason I still can't fathom, I thought I wanted to be a doctor and so chose sciences for A-level, dropping the French that I had loved.

My sixth form college did have a German teacher, however, and so I signed up to do an O-level in that alongside the A-levels. By the first day of term I was looking forward to the German more than the sciences, but a timetable clash meant I couldn't do the German after all. I was crestfallen, and although I have

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since cobbled together a knowledge of German, it is patchy and passive and I still greatly regret that language door closing on me at 16. I really wish I knew German better: it has been an important language in all the places I've worked and fluency in it would definitely have helped my career.

It was quickly clear that I wasn't doctor material, and I ended up studying biology at university. There I had an enormous stroke of luck: I managed to get onto an option to spend a year studying biology in France, with support from the EU's Erasmus programme. My A-level results wouldn't have been good enough to get me the year abroad outright, but someone dropped out of the course in the first year and I was able to replace them. The year in France gave me an experience of living abroad and the taste for learning more languages. Its presence on my CV was directly responsible for getting me my first 'serious' job and indirectly responsible for getting me the job I do now.

Before then, however, there was another language interlude: after university I wanted to see the world a little. I trained to become a teacher of English as a foreign language, and found myself teaching adults in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, which at that time was a new country emerging from the end of communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of Czechoslovakia. It was a fascinating time to be there. Alongside teaching the locals my own tongue, I threw myself into learning their language, Slovak. I had no inkling of it at the time, but this urge to learn a new language also had a fundamental effect on my career path.

2. Language knowledge multiplies work opportunities

After a year of teaching, I found a job working as a journalist and broadcaster for the English-language section of the Slovak national radio station's foreign broadcasting service. I was considered for this position only because I had started to learn Slovak, and the job itself accelerated my ability in the language. Before long I was confident enough to start taking freelance translation work – and

since there were virtually no other native English speakers around at that time who could read Slovak, I quickly gained a lot of clients. I also began working part-time as an in-house translator and interpreter for the Bratislava office of Deloitte, a large business services company. By the time I returned to the UK after three and a half years, I knew the language well and had a good amount of experience in translation and interpreting.

Working life then took another new turn: I had become interested in environmental issues and decided to study for a master's degree in European environment policy. But first I had to earn the money to pay for my study, and again languages came to my aid: I set up as a freelance translator of Slovak and the closely-related language of Czech. After a year's work, which included a very interesting job for Manchester United during a Champions League fixture, including interpreting for Sir Alex Ferguson in the post-match press conference, I had earned enough to start my master's degree.

The first job I was offered after the master's was as a journalist, based in London and responsible for writing about European policymaking on the environment. My new boss told me that my knowledge of French had been a major factor in giving me the job. It was also crucial in his offer of a promotion a few months later: a move to Brussels to become the news service's EU correspondent. In that role, knowing French often helped me to get ahead – particularly when reporting on decisions made by the European Court of Justice, whose judgements always appear first in French.

A few years later I was ready for another challenge and again my earlier decisions to learn languages gave me an option I wouldn't have had otherwise: I saw an advertisement for translators to work for the EU civil service. The minimum requirement is an ability to translate from two EU languages into one other. Slightly to my surprise, I passed the recruitment tests and a while later began working for the European Commission as a translator. One wonderful thing about the job has been the training we get to learn even more languages – I've been lucky to follow courses in three other European languages, and that knowledge will surely be useful to me wherever my career takes me next.

The organisation I work for, the European Union, is probably the biggest employer of linguists in the world: it has over 4,000 translators and interpreters on staff, and thousands more working on a freelance basis, all of whom serve the EU's language regime, in which all 24 official languages have equal status. This means all legislation, and many meetings, are translated and interpreted into all 24 languages. Staff linguists need to know at least two languages to be recruited, and many come to know several more over their careers. Cuts to the EU's budget have meant a reduction in staff numbers, but the EU still recruits many linguists each year and is likely to continue to do so. The volume of documents that need translating is increasing, and for translators into English in particular, the range of languages used is wide: we have a persistent deficit of native-level English speakers who are able to translate from the EU's less commonly studied languages, like Bulgarian, Estonian and Portuguese.

The advent of new translation and interpreting technologies seems not to be slowing recruitment in the sector: the EU has embraced these technologies as essential to improving its linguistic work. The use of translation memory software helps to ensure consistency of terminology across legislative texts and to accelerate the translation of repetitive documents. There is a popular conception that machine translation technologies such as Google Translate will eventually remove the need for humans to do this job. This doesn't seem to be true in our organisation: the EU has developed its own machine translation technology, adapted to the administrative and legal documents that we have to deal with. Rather than replacing humans, instead it simply helps them to be more efficient. Since almost all of our translations relate in some way to legislation, it is essential to have a pair of real human eyes checking the accuracy of translations, however good the automated output.

It's clear from all this that any decision to learn a language – whether a 'big' one or a 'small' one – is a decision that will increase career options for finding work. In my profession, as a translator and occasional interpreter, knowing another language is obviously a fundamental requirement, but the same principle holds across many different sectors of activity, however central languages are to the work being done.



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Employability for languages: a handbook

Edited by Erika Corradini, Kate Borthwick, and Angela Gallagher-Brett

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